

Understanding the Old Testament

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The basic question which underlies what I have to say is how fully can we understand the Old Testament? And in asking this question I would like to draw a distinction between the understanding of the Old Testament and the exegesis of it. By the understanding of it I mean the discovery of what the Hebrew text says, and by the exegesis of it I mean the exposition of what the Hebrew text says when that has been discovered, so far as it can be discovered. We are familiar today—all too familiar—with such phrases as ‘the Old Testament says’ or ‘the Bible says’, But can we always be sure what it says? The truth is that it is rarely an easy task to discover what it says. In our endeavour to discover what it says, we encounter a preliminary question. What do we mean when we speak of the Old Testament? Is it the Old Testament in Hebrew, or in the Greek, or Aramaic, or Syriac, or Latin versions? Or in the Authorized Version or the Revised Version? Or in one of the many translations into English, as well as into other languages, which have appeared in recent years, and of which there are more still to come? The Old Testament as we know it in the original Hebrew and in the ancient versions and in modern translations by no means always presents a uniformity of statement. The answer to our question is probably that, if we wish to discover what the Old Testament says, we shall not find it in any one of these texts alone, not even in the Hebrew text itself. For this text has first to be established in its original form, so far as this

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can be done, by reference to the ancient versions, especially the Greek version we know as the Septuagint, and by reference to Hebrew manuscripts. A good illustration of the deficiency of the Hebrew text in telling us the whole story is to be found in I Sam. xiv. 41 where the Greek version by its longer text removes the obscurity of two Hebrew words and the abruptness with which they are introduced. When the most likely original Hebrew text has been established, then the most probable meaning of the text must be extracted. This too is a difficult task, which must take into account the whole family of Semitic languages and some non-Semitic languages as well. In the same way the text of the ancient versions—in both Semitic and non-Semitic languages needs to be established, both by reference to the Hebrew text and to manuscript authorities, and problems of language arise here also. The most probable original text of the Old Testament can thus only be obtained as the result of a highly complex operation which involves careful

comparison of ancient texts as well as intense study of linguistic problems. Only when these tasks have been undertaken to the full limit of possibility are we entitled to assert with any confidence what the Old Testament says, or what we believe it to say.¹ If we would understand the Old Testament in the sense in which I am using it, that is, if we would discover what it says, it must be through text-critical study and philological research. It is upon sound principles of both these spheres of study that the whole structure of the exegesis of the Old Testament must rest. The textual critic and the philologist between them provide the foundations on which the exegete can build. Sound exegesis of the Old Testament can thus only rightly be expected when the meaning of the

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text, the understanding of it, has, so far as is possible, been discovered.

How far then can we discover what the Old Testament says? In attempting to answer this question I shall try, so far as I can, to avoid technicalities and to make myself intelligible to those who are not acquainted with the Hebrew language. For it is of Hebrew that I speak, since our question—how far can we discover what the Old Testament says?—is only another way of asking how well can we know ancient Hebrew? The answer to this question might seem at first sight a simple one—we have the Hebrew text of the Old Testament—is that not sufficient basis for the study of classical Hebrew? The answer is an emphatic negative. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament provides us with only meagre evidence of the ancient language, for it is only a part, and a very small part, of a much larger Hebrew literature now lost to us. That such a literature existed is evident from the Old Testament itself. The lost book of Jashar is referred to in Josh. x. 13 and 2 Sam. i. 18; another lost book, the book of the Wars of the Lord, is mentioned in Num. xxi. 14; and certain prophetic works—of Nathan, Ahijah and Iddo, who are referred to together in 2 Chron. ix. 29, and of the seers Samuel and Gad, mentioned in I Chron. xxix. 29 - have not survived. The discovery at the Dead Sea in recent years of a number of hitherto unknown Jewish works, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, serves as a powerful reminder of lost literature. Moreover, many, if not most of the books of the Apocrypha were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, but for the most part they have survived only in other languages. Then again we have to remember that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as we have it today must be regarded as a Judaeen work, in the sense that it has been transmitted through southern editors. One of the greatest contributions which the famous letters from Lachish found some thirty years ago—their date is c. 590 B.C.—make to the

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study of the Old Testament is the confirmation they bring that the language of the Old Testament is basically Judaeen Hebrew. Literature that originated in the north, in Israel, such as the book of Hosea, perhaps also the book of Deuteronomy, will thus have passed through Judaeen editorial

¹ My thanks are due to the Delegates, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, who have kindly allowed me, in these opening remarks, to draw upon my *Introduction to Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (Jubilee Volume of the Society for Old Testament Study) which will be published in the summer of 1967.

hands. These southern editors have not, however, succeeded in removing all signs of northern origin, for in the books of Kings, for example, there are clear indications of northern Hebrew dialect. From these considerations it is evident that the literature preserved in the Old Testament is but a small fraction of a very much larger Hebrew literature which was in circulation. Hebraists may well envy the wealth of literature bequeathed by the Greeks and Romans. Had we anything as extensive in classical Hebrew, we should know Hebrew far better than we do. In the circumstances we can never know Hebrew as well as classical scholars know Greek and Latin. We have then to acknowledge that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament does not of itself provide an adequate basis for the study of classical Hebrew.

Other grounds too exist for the view that the basis for the study of classical Hebrew which the Old Testament provides is inadequate. Throughout Israel's history external forces were at work which must have had their effect upon the Hebrew language, but few traces of them survive. Palestine was ever subject to nomad incursions, and dialectical features of all kinds could, we may surmise, have been introduced into the language of its people as a result of constant raids by Semitic-speaking warriors. Again, does the presence of only one or two words which may be regarded as of Philistine origin adequately represent the influence on Hebrew of these foreigners from across the sea? There is but a handful of Egyptian words in the Old Testament—for example, the word for the chest in which Moses was laid among the reeds (Exod. ii. 3). Moses' own name is probably Egyptian in origin; there are three words for 'reeds' (Gen. xli. 2 ; Isa.

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xix. 6f.) which are Egyptian; and it is not surprising that the magicians at Pharaoh's court are called by an Egyptian name (Gen. xli. 24). A few others occur, but may it not be presumed that at certain periods, more especially, perhaps, in the time of Solomon, whose trade contacts with Egypt were close, many Egyptianisms would have penetrated into Palestine? And what of the influence of Phoenicia? Solomon had close relationships with this country as well as with Egypt, and Jezebel, Ahab's wife, hailed thence. Some Phoenician influence on Hebrew is indeed discernible, but it could have been greater than our sources suggest. We may further reflect upon the disruption following upon the years 722 B.C. and 587 B.C., in which the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah respectively fell. The history and religion of these two kingdoms were, as we know, deeply affected by these events, and so too, we may think, was the language of the country. The second book of Kings (xvii. 24) indeed informs us that when Samaria, the northern capital, fell in 722 B.C. to Sargon II of Assyria, Aramaic speaking settlers from Mesopotamia were brought in by the conquerors to people it. In the introduction of this alien population into Samaria we may perhaps see the beginning of bilingualism in the north. From this time onwards Hebrew and Aramaic probably became the two languages of everyday life. The capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadrezzar in 587 B.C. brought with it encroachments on Palestine by desert tribes, including Edomites (Ezek. xxv. 12, xxxv. 5, 10, 12ff.). Encroachments of this kind by peoples speaking some form of Semitic, together with the influences wielded by their Babylonian conquerors, resulted, we may suppose, in new importations into the Hebrew language.

To the small extent of classical Hebrew literature, and to the few traces of external influences upon the language which can be observed, another consideration must be added. The

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Old Testament is first and foremost a religious volume. Its vocabulary is in consequence heavily weighted on the side of religious terms and phrases—about God and man, sin, sacrifice, prayer, worship, atonement, and so on. We are ever conscious of the relatively small area in which the speech of everyday life in Palestine is brought before us. A passage like Isa. xlv. 9-20, remarkable for its description of the makers of idols and the tools of their trade, only serves to emphasize our loss so far as the Hebrew secular vocabulary is concerned.

If then the Hebrew text of the Old Testament presents us with a restricted field of study, is it possible to carry our study further, beyond the evidence of the Hebrew text itself, and so move towards a better understanding of what the Old Testament says, and so in turn to a sounder exegesis of it? The answer is—yes, it is, and our chief means of so doing is the science of comparative Semitic philology, which, since the nineteenth century, has become firmly established through the study of, in addition to Hebrew, also Akkadian (Babylonian and Assyrian), Aramaic (both western and eastern, the latter represented by Syriac), Phoenician, Arabic (north and south), and Ethiopic, to mention the major languages which make up the Semitic family of languages, and which the Hebraist today must make his concern. Here again there have been losses, for some Semitic languages have either disappeared completely, or have left only the faintest traces behind them. The languages spoken by the Amalekites and Kenites, for example—what were they like? A seal or two tells us a little, but very little, of the tongue spoken by the Ammonites, and a few inscribed jar—handles hardly do more than give us a hint as to the language of the Edomites. Since these were all Semitic peoples, we may assume that the languages they spoke will have been not too dissimilar to Hebrew. This is at least the case with the language of the Moabites, another people bordering on

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Israel. The Moabite Stone, which preserves an inscription of Mesha, king of Moab, who is mentioned in 2 Kings iii. 4f. as revolting against Israel, shows that the language of Moab is so close to Hebrew as to allow us to regard it almost as a dialect of Hebrew. If there have been losses, there have been gains too. The most spectacular has been the emergence of a hitherto unknown Semitic language at Ugarit, the ancient name of Ras Shamra, on the north Syrian coast. Here were found some forty years ago tablets dating from the fourteenth century B.C., on which are preserved poetical, mythological texts written in a language which is difficult of classification, but which may perhaps be described broadly as 'Hebraic'. These texts have thrown an immense amount of light on the religion of Israel, and on the Hebrew language and literature, especially poetic literature. It is gratifying to observe that interest in these texts, which has in recent years been somewhat eclipsed by interest in the Dead Sea scrolls, is reviving, and that their great importance is again being recognized. For this native Canaanite literature, which

was current in Palestine before the entry of the Israelites, has far more to tell us about the Old Testament—its religion, literature, and language—than have the scrolls from the Dead Sea.

As knowledge of the other Semitic languages has advanced, so too has our knowledge of classical Hebrew, and it is possible today to arrive at new meanings of Hebrew words which were quite unknown previously. I shall return later to this aspect of our study. The historical approach to the study of Hebrew is in the first place concerned with the development of the language from what is called proto-Semitic to the form in which it meets us in the Old Testament. By proto-Semitic is meant the parent language which the Semites are assumed—I repeat, assumed—to have spoken when they lived together in Arabia before they left in successive waves to people the lands where they are found

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at a later date. The existence of proto-Semitic, of a parent language, is, as I have indicated, an assumption, a fiction, if you like, and any attempt to reconstruct it can only be tentative and hypothetical. An assumption, or fiction, though it be, it is yet a useful working hypothesis, if it serves only to remind us that the Hebrews will from the first have shared with their fellow Semites characteristics of language which we today can only recover from the other Semitic languages.

Mixed ancestry reveals itself in mixed language. When the Israelites entered Palestine, there were already diverse racial elements in the country—Amorite, Canaanite, Hittite, Babylonian, Egyptian—Semitic and non-Semitic—and some of them will have contributed to the later Israelite stock. The Old Testament itself is aware of Israel's mixed origin. A Babylonian element in it is suggested by the tradition of Abraham's departure from Ur to Canaan (Gen. xi, 31). In Deut. xxvi. 5 Jacob is described as 'a nomad Aramaean'—not, as the A.V. and R.V. strangely have it, 'a Syrian ready to perish'. And in Gen. xxxi. 47 Laban the Aramaean gives an Aramaic name to the heap of stones gathered in witness of the covenant between him and Jacob, who calls the heap appropriately by a Hebrew name. It would not perhaps be unreasonable to suppose that intermarriage between Israelites and Canaanites was far from uncommon. At any rate we know that Abimelech was a half-breed, the son of Gideon by a Shechemite concubine (Judg. viii. 31). And centuries later Ezekiel traces the ancestry of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to Hittites on their mother's side and to Amorites on their father's side (Ezek. xvi. 45). This recognition of the mixed character of Israel's ancestry, and of her mixed language, has made possible a most welcome addition to our knowledge, not only of the vocabulary of ancient Hebrew, but of its grammar and syntax as well.

When we look back over the history of Hebrew studies,

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we observe that earlier scholars used mainly Arabic and Aramaic for the elucidation of Hebrew. The nineteenth century, however, saw the decipherment of Babylonian and Assyrian cuneiform

and also of Egyptian hieroglyphics, and with it a new era in Semitic studies began. Documents in Babylonian and Assyrian are, of course, ancient, and there are ancient records too in Phoenician and Aramaic. No difficulty arises, therefore, in the use of them for the study of the Hebrew Old Testament whose documents range from c. 1100 B.C. to 165 B.C. The use of Arabic, however, raises problems, for Arabic literature comes on the scene only in the Christian era, there being almost no literature earlier than the time of Muhammad, that is, the seventh century A.D. In other words, Arabic literature begins some eight hundred years later than the latest documents in the Old Testament. Our problem here is to try to determine whether an Arabic word is really ancient, and so can be legitimately used in our study of Hebrew. For, of course, Arabic words which appear to have come into the language later cannot be used for comparative study. Fortunately, there are means whereby the antiquity of some Arabic words can be established. To take but one example—a word familiar to you all—the word *harem*, ‘the apartments set aside for, or separated off for, women’—‘to set aside, separate off’ being the root meaning of the word. This same root is known to us from Babylonian, Assyrian, Phoenician, and Moabite. We need not, therefore, hesitate to assert the antiquity also of the Arabic root. And we can do the same for very many other Arabic words which have their parallels in other Semitic languages as they may be found in documents which are older than the literature of the Arabs. Yet it must be admitted that there is a wide area in the Arabic vocabulary which cannot at the present time be traced back to ancient roots, and this consideration should impose caution in the use of Arabic for our purpose. Unless caution is exercised, we run the risk of equating a

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Hebrew word with an Arabic word which may have been coined at a very much later date. Used with caution, however, the Arabic vocabulary, immensely rich, may be legitimately used in explanation of the Hebrew vocabulary.

Other means too exist by which the antiquity of Arabic words may be determined. First, there are the South Arabian inscriptions which can be traced back as far as c. 100-600 B.C. Through them we can catch a glimpse of Arabic as it was more than a thousand years before it became the sacred language of the Qur’an, and limited though they are in number and subject matter, they yet contribute a good deal to the understanding of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. They are especially valuable for the light they shed on Hebrew proper names. A second means of tracing Arabic back into the pre-Christian centuries is the discovery of what we may call ‘Arabisms’ in early Aramaic inscriptions and in the documents from Ras Shamra. By ‘Arabisms’ is meant words in these sources which can be explained only through the medium of Arabic. We have, further, ‘Arabisms’ in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, which dates from the third century B.C. The Greek translators often preserve a correct tradition of a meaning of a Hebrew word which we can today only recover through the medium of the cognate Semitic languages. This is true also of the other ancient versions—the Syriac Version, the Vulgate, the Targum, and the minor Greek versions of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion. The translators of these versions were not Semitic scholars—they could not be; what they knew was a tradition that a Hebrew word could bear the meaning they gave to it. Not that they always translated correctly. They are not infrequently manifestly wide of the mark in

their translation. Yet even their mistranslations have a value for our purpose, for a Hebrew word, otherwise lost, can sometimes be recovered from them with the aid of comparative Semitic philology.

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The recognition that Hebrew shared a common vocabulary with other Semitic languages—a conclusion which flows from the assumption of a proto-Semitic scheme—has led to greater enrichment of the Hebrew vocabulary, and in consequence to a much greater respect for our standard Hebrew text. Gone are the days, and they are not long ago, when scholars rewrote the Hebrew text of the Old Testament in accordance with their own preconceived notions of how it should read, notions which were based upon the supposition that they knew all the Hebrew it was possible to know. Today we try, whenever possible, to understand the Hebrew text before us, while at the same time leaving room for controlled emendation of it.

The reasons that have led to a cautious use of Arabic for the elucidation of Hebrew have led also to a reserve in the use of Syriac and Ethiopic, for documents in these languages, like Arabic literature, enter late upon the scene of history, being for the most part the work of Christian writers. Much of what I have said about the use of Arabic applies in the same way to the use of Syriac and Ethiopic, and I need not accordingly discuss their use any further, except to say that much of the vocabulary of Syriac and Ethiopic can be traced back into the pre-Christian centuries in much the same way in which we have seen that Arabic can be traced back.

I shall now say a few words about a particularly fascinating aspect of the study of classical Hebrew, which results from the limited extent of Old Testament literature. I refer to the way in which words which occur at an early period fall, as it were, upon a long sleep, to re-awake at a later period, even centuries later. Two examples of this interesting phenomenon may be given. In Isa. xxvii. 1, where Leviathan is described as a swift and writhing serpent, the Hebrew word for 'writhing' occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. It is found, however, in the tablets from Ras Shamra, and very

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remarkably, it is used there of a creature *ltn*, which may well be a primitive form of the Old Testament Leviathan. If Isa. xxvii is to be attributed to the eighth-century prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem, some six hundred years would intervene between these two occurrences of the Semitic word for 'writhing'. If, on the other hand, this chapter is, as is commonly believed, part of a late section of the book of Isaiah, the period of time that separates these two occurrences will be longer still. A second example is the Hebrew word for 'reservoir' which occurs in the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus (I. 3). If we knew only this occurrence in this late book, we might well feel tempted to regard the Hebrew word in question as a late word. But we find an earlier occurrence of it in no less a place than the Moabite Stone—again a document from outside Palestine. For six hundred years or more the word has had its winter's sleep. As our

studies advance, we may expect that many more examples of this phenomenon of linguistic hibernation will come to light.

When we turn to the contribution made to our understanding of the Old Testament by ancient Hebrew inscriptions found in Palestine itself, we have to note first of all that such inscriptions are regrettably few. There are several good reasons for this. First, the ancient Hebrews, unlike their neighbours the Egyptians and Babylonians and Assyrians, had no special gift for administration on a large scale such as begets monumental inscriptions. Again, it is possible that Hebrew inscriptions may not have been allowed to survive on religious grounds. Further, many inscriptions must have been destroyed in the course of the frequent devastation and occupation of Palestine by hostile powers, factors which doubtless contributed also to the loss of Hebrew literature. Moreover, the damp soil of Palestine is inimical to the preservation of perishable writing material, such as papyrus or leather. Only the very exceptional aridity of the Dead Sea region made possible the survival of the scrolls and other

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documents discovered there in recent years. The few ancient Hebrew inscriptions which we have, on durable material such as rock face, potsherds and seals, are, it must be confessed, disappointing so far as the light they shed on our knowledge of the Hebrew vocabulary is concerned. The letters from Lachish provide the longest texts we possess—some eighty lines or so—but they provide little that is new—perhaps one new word and one new phrase. The Siloam inscription, of the time of Hezekiah (eighth century B.C.), consisting of only six lines, does rather better, for it supplies us with three new words, two of which, however, are really only half new, in the sense that their basic meaning was already known.

I must pass over with a mere mention those non-Semitic languages with which the Hebraist today must have at least a nodding acquaintance—Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, Hurrian, Persian. The emergence of Hurrian and of the people who spoke it has been one of the big surprises of our time. For the Hurrians are now known to be the people who are called Horites in the Old Testament—a people who until recently were generally regarded as primitive troglodytes. Today we know them as a people of great importance in the Near East c. 2000 B.C., who left their mark upon the civilization of the Hebrews, more particularly in the domain of law. Their former identification with uncultured dwellers in caves shows how badly wrong we can be.²

Now I would like to offer you a few examples of the fresh light that can be thrown upon the meanings of words in the Old Testament, examples which will, I hope, illustrate the

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² For fuller discussion the reader may be referred to the following: D. Winton Thomas, *The Recovery of the Ancient Hebrew Language*, 1939; 'The Language of the Old Testament', in *Record and Revelation*, edited by H. Wheeler Robinson, 1938, pp. 374-402; 'The Textual Criticism of the Old Testament', in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, edited by H. H. Rowley, 1951, pp. 238-63.

care that must be taken if we wish to discover what the Old Testament says. I hope it will not appear immodest of me if the examples I cite are based upon my own investigations.³

My first example is the word known in its English form as belial. Various explanations of this Hebrew word have been offered, but none of them is, in my view at least, satisfactory. The word derives, I believe, from a root meaning 'swallow', and any explanation of it should start from a study of 2 Sam. xxii. S (=Ps. xviii. 4), where we find 'the floods of belial' (A.V. 'floods of ungodly men'; R.V. 'floods of ungodliness'; margin in both 'Belial'), parallel to 'the waves of death'. We are here led into the sphere of the underworld, the watery abyss, so that the word belial means literally 'the swallower', the abyss that engulfs. In Syriac the root is used with the underworld as subject, and a derivative from the equivalent Arabic root means 'whirlpool, subterranean conduit'. The Oxford English Dictionary informs us that in Old English the noun 'swallow' was used of a deep hole or opening in the earth, or pit, gulf, abyss. A 'man of belial' is thus one whose actions or words engulf him, bring him to the abyss, to the underworld. Such a wicked man is what we might call in colloquial English 'an infernal fellow'. Perhaps the phrase was a colloquial one in Hebrew also. From an original sense 'swallower', that is, the underworld that engulfs, it is easier to see how the word could have been transferred later to describe a demon, the Belial of the apocalyptic writings (frequent in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs) and of the New Testament (2 Cor. vi. 15).⁴

My second example is taken from the description of the able woman in Prov. xxxi. In verse 11 we read (R.V.) 'the

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heart of her husband trusteth in her, and he shall have no lack of gain'. The Hebrew word translated 'gain' is commonly used elsewhere in the Old Testament for booty obtained in war, an unsuitable meaning in our passage. Now there is an Arabic proverb which runs 'a clever woman is not without wool' (to spin or weave when she has nothing to do). The striking fact here is that the Arabic word for 'wool' is the equivalent of the Hebrew word used in this verse in Proverbs. What the Hebrew text is saying is, literally, 'wool is never lacking to her'—we insert 'to her' as the Septuagint suggests—this able woman is always at her wool. In verse 19 of this chapter xxxi we read (R.V.) 'she layeth her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle'. There is an Aramaic proverb which runs 'there is no wisdom for a woman other than spinning'. In the Ras Shamra texts the goddess Asherah—according to one translator—'takes hold of her spindle ... she occupies herself with wool'. In post-biblical Hebrew, in the Mishnah, we are told that among the works which a wife must perform for her husband is 'working in wool' for 'idleness leads to unchastity'. Jerome recommends that a young girl should have as her guardian one who is 'not given to much wine ... but sober, sedate, industrious in spinning wool'. An epitaph to a Roman matron records that 'she kept her house and spun wool', and Livy commends Lucretia when she was found sitting busy at her wool. And finally St. John Chrysostom refers to virgins spinning at

³ The references that follow are added for the benefit of Hebraists who wish to examine the philological argument.

⁴ *Biblical and Patristic Studies in memory of Robert Pierce Casey*, edited by J. Neville Birdsall and Robert W. Thomson, 1963, pp. 11-19.

home. In Proverbs it seems then that we have a further reference to a domestic activity which was widely held in antiquity to be a highly praiseworthy womanly virtue.⁵

My next example comes from the familiar verse in Ps. xxiii (verse 4)—‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’ For ‘the shadow of

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death’ the R.V. has ‘deep darkness’ in the margin, and many modern commentators revocalize the Hebrew word so as to give the meaning ‘deep darkness’. My own approach to this word is to appeal to the superlative force which the use of the word ‘death’ imports in Hebrew, as in Arabic and Syriac, and with which we may compare such English phrases as ‘bored to death’, ‘sick to death of’, ‘died of laughing’, ‘deadly dull’, and so on, where there is no suggestion of physical death, only of something excessive. Samson’s ‘soul was vexed unto death’, that is, he was sick to death, as we might say, of Delilah’s importuning (Judg. xvi. 16), and Jonah (iv. 9) declared that he did well ‘to be angry unto death’, that is, to be extremely angry. In Hebrew then ‘shadow of death’ means ‘very deep shadow’, ‘thick darkness’, and this is the meaning which the Hebrew word has wherever it occurs in the Old Testament. In a number of passages it stands in parallelism with another word for ‘darkness’. The phrase ‘the valley of the shadow of death’ has become entrenched in the English language, and it has been, and is, beloved by and comfortable to many. For most, we may surmise, the emphasis in the phrase, as traditionally translated, rests upon ‘death’ rather than upon ‘shadow’. This seems to me a mistaken emphasis. The psalmist has in mind one of the ravines of the wilderness of Judah when deep darkness falls. Even in the darkest ravine he will not fear, for the Lord is with him. While the loss of a hallowed phrase may be, and has been, regretted by many, others have given a warm welcome to the new translation—‘though I walk through the darkest valley’—which has been incorporated in the Revised Psalter recently approved by Parliament for use in churches. It has seemed to them more satisfying, in that it is applicable to all those dark hours of the soul to which mankind is prone, and not to death only.⁶

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Many, if not most, Hebrew verbs were originally biliteral, but at the stage at which we meet the language in the Old Testament they have, by various means, become trilateralized. This triliterality easily leads to confusion between roots, especially in cases where two roots, though separable and bearing entirely different meanings, are spelt the same. We may consider one example. There is a very common Hebrew verb meaning ‘to know, to be acquainted with’, and until recently this verb has been so translated wherever it occurs in the Old Testament. Sometimes the resulting translation is extremely forced. For instance, when Samson broke the cords with which Delilah had bound him, it is said, according to the A.V. and R.V., ‘so his strength was not known’ (Judg. xvi. 9). But obviously his strength was known! Commentators

⁵ *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* III, 1955, pp. 291f; *Vetus Testamentum* xv, 1965, pp. 277f.

⁶ *Vetus Testamentum* iii, 1953, pp. 219-22; *Journal of Semitic Studies* vii, 1962, pp. 191-203.

attempt to surmount the difficulty by translating ‘so the secret of his strength was not known’. But this is to read too much into the Hebrew word, which can only mean ‘his strength’. The explanation, it may be suggested, lies elsewhere. It is known today that there existed in Hebrew a second root, spelt exactly like the root meaning ‘to know’, but bearing a very different meaning. The basic meaning of this second root is, as we know from Arabic, ‘to be still, quiet, at rest, submissive’, and from this basic meaning the root develops such meanings as ‘to be made still, submissive, to be humiliated, to be punished’. Now with this meaning in mind we can see more clearly what the Hebrew text actually says about Samson’s display of strength. It says ‘his strength was not made submissive’, that is, his strength was not overcome. This meaning is entirely compatible with the context, and is, we may believe, the sense which the writer intended to convey. This meaning of the verb in this passage was recognized in ancient times, for the translators of the Old Testament into Syriac translated ‘his strength was not shaken, disturbed’. These translators were aware of a tradition which attributed to the Hebrew verb in our passage the meaning

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which we today associate with the second Hebrew root, which is to be distinguished from the more familiar root with the sense ‘to know’.⁷

A further example of this second root may be seen in a well-known passage, namely, Isaiah liii. 3—‘He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.’ So runs the rendering of the A.V. and R.V. in words that have echoed round the world in the majestic music of Handel’s *Messiah*. But does it truly represent what the Hebrew text says? ‘Rejected of men’—this phrase is probably better translated ‘standing aloof from men, avoiding men’, that is to say, the suffering Servant is depicted, not as rejected by others—as if the verb is passive—but as himself withdrawing from human society—an active sense being given to the verb.⁸ Another possibility is that the phrase means ‘lacking in manhood’, that is, scarcely recognizable as a man, a meaning which would fit in well with the further description of the Servant (in verse 2)—‘he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him’; and again in Iii. 14—‘his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men’. It is, however, the phrase traditionally translated ‘acquainted with grief’ that links this passage in Isaiah with the Samson story. This traditional translation is, I believe, unjustified, since there is no known parallel to such a use of the passive form of the Hebrew root ‘to know’. Commentators have frequently remarked upon the difficulty of the form, but they have offered no satisfactory solution of it. The solution seems to be to see in this verb in Isaiah our second Hebrew root. We may then translate the phrase ‘reduced by, humiliated by, sickness, or disease’—‘sickness, disease’ being a more correct translation of the Hebrew noun than ‘grief’. Again the context supports such a meaning. The Servant, we

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⁷ *Journal of Theological Studies* xxxv, 1934, p. 298.

⁸ *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* IV, 1957, pp. 11f.

are told in liii. 4, was 'stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.' It is interesting to observe in passing that the meaning 'reduced by, humiliated by' in Isa. liii. 3 has been preserved in Rabbinic tradition. This meaning of the Hebrew verb enables us to offer a fresh translation of the phrase in verse 11—we should translate, not 'by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many', but 'by his humiliation'.⁹

Lastly, it is well known that Hebrew psychological states are frequently expressed in physical terms, breathing and breath being among the more prominent. A simple and familiar example is the long-suffering, patient man, whom Hebrew describes as taking long, deep breaths, in contrast to the impatient man whose breath comes in short gasps. Less well known is it that the basic idea of breathing underlies the common Hebrew verb meaning 'to comfort', which in some contexts is translated 'to repent'. From the meaning the verb has in Arabic we know that the Hebrew verb literally means 'to breathe deeply, to pant'. To express the idea of 'to comfort', Hebrew uses the causative theme of the verb, that is, to cause someone to breathe deeply, to take long breaths, thereby gaining ease and relief. The verb, in a different theme, can be used also of God. When, for example, in Jonah iii. 10 we read 'and God repented of the evil, which he said he would do unto them; and he did it not', 'repented' means literally that God took a deep breath of relief over the fact that he did not after all have to punish Nineveh. The basic idea which lies behind the Hebrew verb for 'to comfort' throws welcome light on Gen. xxvii. 42 where Rebekah tells Jacob, according to the quaint translation of the A.V. and R.V.—'Behold, thy brother Esau, as touching thee, doth comfort himself, purposing to kill thee.' What the Hebrew text says, of course, is that Esau is breathing

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hard, panting after Jacob to kill him. And were Job's comforters really comforters? Perhaps they were breathers out of mere breath, that is, windbags whose words amount to nothing. Job. xxi. 34 may then be translated 'how then do you breathe out at me mere breath, and answer me with profitless lies?'¹⁰

I hope that what I have said will have gone some way to justify the statement with which I began, namely, that it is rarely an easy task to understand the Old Testament, to discover what it in fact says. I hope too that, in trying to show you something of what is involved in the task of discovery, I have made it clear that the modern student of the language of the Old Testament, as of its history, literature, religion, law and so on, must cast his eyes beyond the horizon of Israel, and adventure into the countries of the ancient Near East which were Israel's neighbours. For it is the ancient Near East, not Israel alone, which is the arena in which the student of Israel's history and culture must move today. The modern Hebraist must be a Semitist, nay more, an orientalist. In his task of trying to discover what the Old Testament says, he blazes the trail for

⁹ *Journal of Theological Studies* xxxviii, 1937, pp. 404f.

¹⁰ *Expository Times* xlv, 1933, pp. 191f.

D. Winton Thomas, *Understanding the Old Testament*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 6 March 1967. London: The Athlone Press, 1967. pp.22.

the exegete, whether he be historian, theologian, student of comparative religion or of ancient law. If any of you had the expectation that you might hear from me some new theory of interpretation of the Old Testament, I hope you will not be disappointed. There is, as I have tried to show, a prior task to exegesis, namely, the task of trying to discover what the Old Testament says. This task has claimed my chief attention for nearly forty years of academic life, and I hope that my preoccupation with it over so long a period may appear to you a good reason why I should have attempted to interest you also in it.

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